



EXHIBIT D

SUGGESTIONS FOR PLANNING AND CONDUCTING CDBG COMMUNITY SURVEYS

A. INTRODUCTION

If you feel you need additional information on community needs or public opinion regarding local needs, you may want to conduct a community opinion survey. A community survey can be a useful tool for identifying community needs or concerns and for documentation to meet the requirements of the CDBG Program. It also provides an opportunity to learn more about your community by giving citizens a chance to say what they want for and from the community. By having citizens participate in making decisions that affect them, it also assures them that their thoughts are important. In addition, a survey can help community leaders make difficult choices, set needed priorities, and design effective programs and projects.

The survey can be done before or after conducting the first required public meeting. Several communities have done the survey as part of their information gathering process and reported the results at their first public meeting to start off the discussion of community issues.

B. DESIGNING THE SURVEY

When designing a questionnaire, the community must decide on the purpose of the survey and what kind of information is needed. Once this decision is made, the actual questions can be written. This requires careful planning to maintain survey reliability and validity. How the questions are grouped, worded and the sequence within the groups are important considerations. There should be several styles of questions asked: yes-no, multiple choice, rating scale, etc.

MDOC CDBG staff have prepared a model survey format which can be adapted by CDBG applicants. Titled "Model Community Opinion Survey Form" (see Exhibit H), the form provides examples of the types of questions which can be asked to help identify local citizens' perceptions of needs and priorities for community development.

The survey must be tailored to fit your community. The model survey is intended to list the variety of questions that can be asked and will not fit every community's needs or situation.

If the community plans to apply for CDBG funds, the community survey can also be modified to determine the community's eligibility for CDBG assistance, if data from the U. S. Census Bureau is inadequate or out of date. For more information on how to do an income survey that will meet MDOC requirements, see the MDOC publication, Documenting Benefit to Low and Moderate Income Persons before you include questions regarding household income in your survey. CDBG applicants may also choose to combine elements from the opinion survey and the income survey into a single survey format.

There are several important points to keep in mind when designing a survey questionnaire:

1. Do not use the survey to do everything - keep it simple.

There are all sorts of reasons for conducting a survey. One of the very first things a community needs to decide is what it wants to accomplish and what kind of information is really needed. In most cases, a local government is trying to identify community needs and problems. Sometimes other community groups will want to add other questions to the survey once they know the city or some other group is preparing a community-wide survey. The local government should be cautious in expanding the scope of the survey. It can become confusing and require significantly more time in its preparation, implementation, and interpretation.

2. Consider beginning the questionnaire or survey with a positive approach.

A survey should begin with a question that peaks the interest of the respondent such as, "What do you consider the most important improvement in the community in the past five years?" or "what do you like about living in this community?"

3. Avoid leading questions.

A question such as, "Do you think the city needs better services?" leads the respondent to an easy answer of yes. Most citizens would feel that there is always some room for improvement. It is better to ask respondents to rate specific items provided in the questionnaire and to use a checklist with different categories, such as "Very Important," "Important," "Not Important," and "No Opinion." A questionnaire should always allow respondents to indicate they have no opinion, since it should not force or direct answers.

4. Avoid questions that require more information than the public normally would have.

A question such as, "Do you think the town should operate its own police department or should the city enter into a service contract with the county sheriff?" may require specific information about workload and personnel, legal constraints, costs and efficiency, and other administrative issues that the average citizen would not have.

5. Do not raise false hopes.

Be careful as you prepare the survey to avoid questions of statements that might raise false expectations. A question such as, "Would you support a Community Development Block Grant application to the Montana Department of Commerce for \$500,000 so we can improve our water system at no cost to the city?," could raise hopes that might not be realized (and it also violates Rule "3", above, because it is a leading question).

6. Give respondents a reasonable deadline.

People are more apt to respond if they know the task is important enough to have a deadline.

7. Provide the name and phone number of someone they can contact if respondents have any questions or concerns about the survey or the application.

C. SAMPLE SIZE

If a community has, for example, 1,000 households, it could be time consuming and expensive to interview every single one, especially if done on a door-to-door basis. In these cases, it may be more efficient to survey only a portion of the total population and use that portion to represent a cross section of the entire community. A "sample" is the portion of the total population that is to be surveyed. The total population may be a neighborhood, a county water and sewer district, or a town or county that is served by a public facility. The total population from which you take the sample will be the area that is served by the CDBG-funded project.

To be reasonably certain that the sample is a statistically valid representation of the entire population, it must include a minimum amount of households, which varies according to the size of the total population. To continue the example above, if the community surveyed only 50 out of the 1,000 households, there would be a good chance that many of those 50 are not representative of the entire community. This would be especially true if all 50 were selected from a specific neighborhood, instead of randomly.

In order to document that local income surveys have been conducted with a sound methodology, the Department of Commerce uses a formula which sets a minimum sample size for the survey, according to the population of the project area. Some communities choose to survey all local residents through mailed surveys; in these cases, the sample size requirement is easiest to meet.

The MDOC sample size requirement does not apply to community opinion surveys, however, local officials will want to make sure that the results of any opinion survey provide a statistically valid representation of the views of local citizens. For this reason, local officials should try to get responses from a reasonable percentage of households, consistent with the MDOC survey sample requirement.

There are many complex formulas for determining how large a sample you must have in order to be reasonably confident that the sample accurately reflects your population. The formula used by the Department of Commerce is relatively simple and has been accepted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) since 1979, as follows:

$$\text{Sample size} = \frac{25}{.000625 + \frac{25}{\text{population size}}}$$

For the purposes of most local surveys, the population size is the number of households in your community, not the number of individuals, since doing a local survey on the basis of households, rather than individual persons, will be easier to accomplish. For example, if your community has 1,000 households, as in the example above, your sample size would be calculated as follows:

$$\frac{25}{.000625 + \frac{25}{1000}} = \frac{25}{.000625 + .000250} = \frac{25}{.000875} = 286$$

The table at the end of this exhibit lists various populations and the sample sizes needed in order to validate a survey. It should be noted that sample size is the number of actual responses received in a survey, not just the number of households contacted. There will always be some households that do not choose to respond, and that being the case, the community should be prepared to make additional efforts, such as a follow-up mailing or more door-to-door interviews, until it has an adequate number of responses. Another way to deal with non-response is to over sample.

If you need 250 surveys returned for a statistically valid sample, try to mail surveys to 500 households.

Communities conducting CDBG income surveys as part of a needs assessment survey must sample and get completed responses from at least the minimum number of households established by the formula for their population. The returned surveys must be random and meet the minimum number required by the formula for the sample size.

Note: In 1997, at the request of MDOC, HUD approved a change in the sample size requirement for local income surveys. The formula for survey sample size shown above requires a larger percentage of responses as total population decreases. This has proved a serious obstacle for very small communities. For example, using this formula, a community of 40 households would have to have a 90% response to be valid. However, under the new standard, if the number of households in the survey area is 200 or less, the minimum percentage of households which must provide a complete response to have a valid sample is 67%.

D. RANDOM SELECTION OF HOUSEHOLDS TO BE SURVEYED

In addition to having a large enough sample, the households to be surveyed must be chosen at random so that the results will not be biased. In other words, everyone who is included in the total population to be served by your project should have an equal chance of being included in the sample. Before you can take a random sample, you must first find a way to identify individual households in your project area. For mailed or telephone surveys, many communities have used voter registration rolls, telephone books, or motor vehicle registration records to provide a comprehensive list to begin with. None of these lists is perfect, but all are generally available and usable.

Determine the interval you will sample by dividing your sample size into your population size. If, for instance, you have 400 households and plan to sample 200 of them, you should take every other name or for a door-to-door survey, visit every other house. (You may want to roll a dice to decide at which name or house you will start, rather than simply starting with the first one.) Another method is to write down all the household addresses in your project area, mix them up in a hat, and draw the number of house addresses you will need to meet your sample size. A random numbers table may also be used. Contact your CDBG liaison if you wish to use this method and do not have access to or know how to use the table.

For door-to-door surveys, each unit in a multi-family structure, such as an apartment, should be counted as a separate address. Call-back visits should be made to sample residences where no one was available for the initial interview. If the call-back visit is also unsuccessful, the next address in sequence should be interviewed. Often if no one is home in the day, they may be in during the evening, so if the original visit was in the daytime, the call-back should be scheduled for evening.

E. PUBLICITY

People are more likely to respond to an income survey if they know there is a good reason for the survey. If the community survey is well publicized, there will be a minimum of lost time in explanations and a more favorable reception by the public. Under no circumstances should a survey be attempted without wide publicity first. Citizens are understandably hesitant to respond to a survey unless the purpose and need for the information is clearly understood. A short cover letter with a mailed questionnaire will let people know why the information is important and that you care about the

results. Be specific about why you are conducting the survey. (Sample cover letters are included in Exhibits F and G.)

Complete honesty with the public and cooperation with and from the media can make a difference between success and failure. Publicity can include radio announcements or call-in talk programs, newspaper articles, flyers in the monthly water bill, and posters in local grocery stores or the post office.

F. DISTRIBUTION AND COLLECTION OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The following are various ways to conduct the actual income survey:

1. Distribution of the questionnaire by mail, requesting mail return;
2. Distribution in public places or in the newspaper, requesting mail return;
3. Distribution door-to-door to be either returned by mail or picked up by someone; and
4. Direct door-to-door interviews by an individual surveyor.

In deciding how to administer the questionnaire, you should consider several factors: time, cost, available personnel, and desired rate of return. You might send interviewers out to visit each household and ask the questions at that time; you might use a community service group (Boy or Girl Scouts, Kiwanis, etc.) to drop off and pick up the questionnaires, allowing respondents to answer them at their leisure; you could conduct the survey by telephone, or mail. Each survey technique has advantages and disadvantages.

Mailed Questionnaires

Experience has shown that survey forms sent through the mail generally have a low percentage of return. Better results are obtained with volunteers who personally distribute and collect the questionnaire. (One community received a 55% return rate by utilizing local Boy Scouts; another had a 56% return by using a high school social studies class to distribute questionnaires and pick them up a week later.) If you plan to mail or drop off the questionnaire, you should add a cover letter (preferably from the community's chief elected official) explaining why the survey is being conducted and what the results will be used for.

It is also wise to provide a stamped, addressed envelope for return of the questionnaire to help assure the respondent that the information will be confidential. Mail surveys provide better assurance of confidentiality, particularly if you are also requesting household income information. While guaranteeing confidentiality, make sure you have a way to follow-up to improve your response rate. One method is to number each return envelope before you mail the survey and keep a list of matching addresses and numbers. That way you can send out a second mailing to those who did not respond. This will also provide a means for the Department of Commerce to verify your income survey by spot checking a sample of the people who submitted forms. Some communities have color-coded their survey forms to help them determine if particular neighborhoods have concentrations of low and moderate income families.

A weakness of mailed surveys is that survey forms are usually completed only by those who are most interested, or those who will take the time to read the questions and respond. In addition, if there is some uncertainty about the question's intent or the purpose of the survey (such as household income surveys), an individual may not respond. Written questions, even with careful instructions, may not be

understood by some respondents, and they may answer in a manner not consistent with the intent of the question.

The Town of Bridger, Montana used the country's lottery mania to increase the response to their local survey. Local officials placed numbered coupons for those who responded to the mailed survey in a drawing. The grand prize winner received \$200 in "Bridger Bucks," script which was redeemable for merchandise at local businesses. Local merchants also donated gift certificates for other winners to support the survey effort. The town received far more responses to their survey than the required minimum sample. This technique has been used successfully by many other Montana communities since Bridger "pioneered" this approach.

Door-to-Door Interviews

The most reliable and accurate method of conducting a survey is going door-to-door by trained interviewers. The survey team or individual asks each question on the survey form. When the survey process is approached this way, the two-way communication allows for clarification of questions, as well as assuring more complete coverage and response from the community. Every household selected for sampling can be surveyed, or at least returned to several times in an attempt to complete the survey. It is a more personal approach and is a way to convey the importance of the income survey to each household.

A disadvantage of the personal interview is that it cannot provide the level of privacy assured by a mailed questionnaire. Some people may be hesitant to disclose income levels or similar personal information. One compromise approach which has been used by some communities is to take a printed questionnaire door to door. The respondent can complete the questionnaire individually, place the questionnaire in a sealed envelop, and either return it to the interviewer immediately or by mail. This approach has the advantage of offering greater privacy while, at the same time, the interviewer is available to explain the reason for and importance of the survey or to clarify any of the questions on the survey. Where questionnaires will be picked up immediately, they should be very brief, such as those asking only household income information.

Be sure to pretest the survey to identify any problems or unclear questions, then train everyone involved to be consistent in administering the survey.

G. INTERPRETING AND REPORTING THE RESULTS

The survey results should be tabulated and summarized. Interpretation of the survey results involves summing like responses to individual questions. One of the most frequent weaknesses with local opinion surveys is that the process stops here with a tabulation of the responses. If the survey effort is to be worthwhile, it is critical that the local officials and citizens involved in the survey effort take the time to carefully consider what the survey responses are saying. Try to identify trends and draw conclusions. After the results have been thoroughly analyzed, a report should be issued to the city council or county commission. It is often very helpful to illustrate results using graphs or bar charts. In addition to briefing local officials, the public should be informed through the media and through a community meeting or forum. (Summaries of the results should be provided to the local newspaper and radio or TV stations.) Local officials or members of a Needs Assessment Committee can also make presentations to community groups to discuss the results and get their feed back.

H. CONCLUSION

A common weakness in the use of a community opinion survey is that not all citizens may be equally informed of the various issues or problems facing the community. For example, citizens may often identify street repairs or recreation facilities as a major need, while the town council places water or sewer improvements at the top because only they are aware that the community is facing state compliance action to bring their facility up to federal or state water quality standards. The public meetings involved in preparing a needs assessment can be a valuable means of educating citizens about the critical issues facing the community and why sometimes costly remedial action must take place.

All applications for CDBG funds involve data gathering of some kind, whether it is a matter of researching census data, using records from a local agency, or actually conducting a community survey specifically for the application. If you have questions about the design of a questionnaire or possible alternative sources of information, please call the MDOC CDBG staff at the Community Development Division, 841-2791.